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How and Why did America become involved in the Vietnam War?

The Vietnam War lasted from 1945 to 1965 involving many countries including America, although America gradually got involved in the war unlike the French and the Japanese and caused many deaths. The Vietminh was formed which meant that there was then soldiers to fight against the French and Japanese to gain control over their own country. Right before the Vietnam War the Vietminh had the help of American Intelligence services, the OSS (Organization of Strategic Services), they helped train the Vietminh so by the end of 1944, the guerrilla attacks they had planned on the Japanese and French were ready to be taken place. Without the help of the Americans, they would not have been ready. What else did the Americans do to get involved in this war?

In March 1945, World War II had just ended and the Vietnam War just began. The Japanese managed to get rid of the French which did not really make much of a difference because in August of 1945, the Japanese surrendered which meant that World War II was over and they had to withdraw from all of their countries that they had control over in South East Asia; this included Vietnam. The leader of the Vietminh, Ho Chi Minh was determined that they would take over Vietnam and that it would not be the French. Then in September 1945 the Vietminh announced that Vietnam had now become an independent and democratic republic. At this point, the Americans believed that it was right that the Vietnamese people ruled their own country and did not want to see the French back in charge. No matter what anyone did, they could not stop the return of the French in December of 1945 when they came to Indo-China to re-establish French power there. Unfortunately in the South of Vietnam the Vietminh were not strong enough to fight the French so the French leader, Leclerc took over in the South by March 1946. Although the French had conquered they just could not keep control of it because the French did not have enough troops to hold down the areas they had conquered. Ho Chi Minh travelled to Paris to try and come to an agreement; all they could agree on was a ceasefire. This did not work because in November 1946 the French broke this ceasefire which caused attacks to break out in Haiphong and Hanoi. The Vietminh then retreated into the jungle and geared up for guerrilla war that the Americans had helped then prepare for. There was not much fighting until 1950, in between these years there was more political development instead of military.

In 1949 the Peoples Republic of China was formed, led by Mao Zedong. This helped the Vietminh because Mao Zedong supplied them with military supplies. Because they were both communist parties they helped and looked out for each other. By the time 1950 came around the Americans had a completely different outlook on this war, because of the Cold War the Americans now had to help any country opposing the spread of communism, this meant that the Americans were now on the side of the French and had to help them defeat the Vietminh. In July of this year just after the Korean War broke out, President Truman had agreed to send the French $15 million in supplies and it was said that after that the Americans were going to spend nearly $3 billion helping the French over the following 4 years.

Giap, the president of South Vietnam at the time was still determined to take on the French in a large battle, he chose a small village called Dien Bien Phu which was on the border of Laos. He got his troops to dig tunnels in order to get closer to the enemy positions which took about two months. On May 7th 1954 the last 10,000 surviving French troops of which half were wounded were forced to surrender, the French knew the war was lost. The French had asked President Eisenhower to send troops to help as well as to use nuclear weapons, President Eisenhower said no to both of these requests. His excuse for this was that America had just ended the war in Korea where 40,000 troops had died and they did not want to see any more American troops die in Vietnam. Eisenhower wanted the French to continue on fighting but they had had enough.

In 1954 the Vietminh wanted early elections so that the people of Vietnam could elect a government for the whole of their country. At the same time in May 1954, Britain, France, China, the Soviet Union, the United States and Vietnam arranged to meet in Geneva, Switzerland where they made the agreement, known as the Geneva agreement, this was that Vietnam was to be split in two, along the 17th parallel, the North ruled by Ho Chi Minh and the South by Ngo Dinh Diem. The Vietminh had to pull their troops from the South and the French had to pull their troops from the North. Over these years of fighting a total of 400,000 troops and civilians had died. The Americans made it clear that they would back Diem because he was a strong enemy of the communists.

Eisenhower was very determined that the Domino effect would not happen in the South of Vietnam, that it would stop at the 17th parallel. The domino effect was that if one of the countries in South East Asia fell to communism then so would the others. Because China was communists already and North Korea and North Vietnam, the Americans were extremely worried about the South of Vietnam, they wanted this to be the end of communism so they supplied Diem’s government with money, supplies and military equipment.

In 1959 North Vietnam had made orders to the Vietminh to begin a terror campaign against Diem’s government. 40,000 officials were assassinated every year for 2 years by the Vietcong. The Vietcong were the Vietminh’s and the Communists together. Also in 1959, North Vietnam created the Ho Chi Minh trail to carry down supplies to the South.

Then in 1960 just before John F. Kennedy was elected for American President, The National Liberation Front in the South was set up by the communists of Hanoi. This appealed to more middle-class people such as doctors and teachers as well as some peasants and workers. The main aims of the NFL were to overthrow Diem and his government, get rid of the Americans and reunite the North and South of Vietnam as one country.

About 16,000 American ‘advisers’ were sent by JFK in 1961 to help organize the South Vietnam army. This was a good thing because in 1962 and 1963 the Vietcong began to use guerrilla tactics against the South Vietnam. These would have been the guerrilla tactics that the Americans previously trained them in. In areas where the NLF was strong, Diem began to take presents away in order to prevent popularity in the South. By summer 1963, two thirds of the population had been moved away to “strategic hamlets”. Later on that year a battle broke out between 350 Vietcong and 2000 South Vietnamese troops who were backed by America with helicopters and American troops. Only three Vietcong bodies were found, compared to 60 South Vietnamese troops killed and three American helicopters shot down. The Vietcong then increased their troops to 23,000.

Many people in Vietnam were Buddhists, Diem was a catholic. Because of all the battles and fights this caused many protests. On the 11th of June a Buddhist monk sat down on a road in Saigon with his arms and legs crossed while other Buddhist monks poured a can of petrol over his body, he then set himself alight and sat there for 10 minutes while his body was covered in flames. Following this protest in May of 1963 many Buddhists decided that they wanted to try and test the law by flying the Buddhist flag while celebrating the Buddhists birthday. This causes troops to open fire killing nine people, including children. After this protest another on followed, on the 10th of May that same year 10,000 Buddhists marched in protest this then led to Diem ordering the arrest of leading Buddhists and their supporters. Also in 1963, JFK was assassinated which left L B. Johnson, the former vice president in control of America.

In 1964 the Vietcong no longer relied on the North for weapons because they had captured about 200,000 American guns from the South Vietnamese. Earlier on this year the Americans had prepared plans to bomb the North of Vietnam. In July of this year the North Vietnamese radar stations in the Gulf of Tonkin by the South Vietnamese. The morning of the 2nd of August, the North Vietnamese sent off 3 torpedo boats heading straight for the USS Maddox. This resulted in one of the torpedo boats sank and the other two were damaged, because there was no American casualties President Johnson ordered the Maddox to stay in the area.

The year 1965 was a very important time because President Johnson was given authority to do whatever he wanted and was necessary by the American Congress. In February of 1965 operation rolling thunder came into place, a huge bombing campaign against the North Vietnamese. Many places were bombed such as: the Ho Chi Minh trail, the capital of North Vietnam and lots of factories and army bases. In March 3,500 American troops arrived in Vietnam to protect the air bases which were being used to bomb north Vietnam. In November there was a small battle in La Drang Valley and the communists suffered many losses. By the end of 1965 there were 200,000 American troops there and about 170,000 Vietcong fighters operating in the South of Vietnam. This meant that America’s war had begun because the North Vietnamese had broken the Geneva agreement he took his authority of the “Tonkin resolution” and decided that the Americans were going to boost up their involvement and were no longer just the backup, they were now officially part of the war.

To conclude, this shows that the Americans had a serious involvement in the Vietnam War because without them the French may not have been able to afford to fight the Vietminh due to the fact that the Americans were supplying the French with about $3 billion over 3 years. The Americans main goal was generally to stop the spread of communism and when Eisenhower came up with the domino theory it began to worry the Americans and the French because they wanted the spread of communism to stop on the 17th parallel. Vietnam was basically an unwinnable war, all the time and money countries out into it no one really got anything from it except more than a million deaths. Many of the troops in the Vietnam War learnt different strategies from other countries that they ended up using against each other. The Americans in 1945 taught the Vietminh their guerrilla tactics which they later used back on the French, at this point the Americans were no longer backing the Vietminh they were on the French’s side because of the results of the Cold War. This war was all about trying to spread communism to the South of Vietnam but also the Western countries wanted to try and stay in control of the countries in Indo-China. The war was not worth all the time and deaths but I am positive that both American leaders and Vietnamese leaders learnt something from this and now as we all look back on it, I am sure that no one wants a war like this to break out again any time soon.

Sources:

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